DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 367 995 CS 214 267

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TITLE Writing Articulation and Assessment.
PUB DATE Oct 93
NOTE 23p.; Paper presented at the Institute for Teaching and Learning Conference (San Jose, CA, October 1993).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Guides - Classroom Use - Teaching Guides (For Teacher) (052)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Class Activities; Higher Education; *Journal Writing; Student Attitudes; Writing Assignments; Writing Evaluation; *Writing Improvement; *Writing Processes
IDENTIFIERS Collaborative Writing; Writing Development

ABSTRACT

Combining the journal writing process with the concepts of collaboration can produce more focused writing and learning. Through the channel of collaborative situations, such as group journal writing, teachers can capitalize on the benefits achieved from the collaborative process and cultivate thinking and writing skills. A group journal writing process was implemented in an upper division applied writing course designed for prospective teachers. Students were divided into groups of four to five members. Students responded, in turn, to a question provided by the teacher. Examination of students' journal entries indicated that the students (1) read and responded to entries by other students; (2) influenced the direction of the entries; (3) supported their ideas through appeal to textual authority; (4) passed the group journals to the next student in a timely manner; (5) wrote more compact and organized entries in group journals than in their individual journals; (6) improved their writing style; and (7) maintained a more mature and objective tone in the group journals than in their individual journals. The instructor subsequently used group journals in two other classes, with similar positive results. Students, without exception, indicated that they enjoyed journal writing. Group journal writing has resulted in improved writing skills, improved comprehension of course content, and an improved attitude toward writing. (Contains 16 references.) (RS)

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Writing Articulation and Assessment

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Abstract

Individual journals have successfully been used in academic courses for the past few years. The addition of a group journal, however, capitalizes upon the influence of collaboration and results in improved attention to writing performance and better comprehension of course content.

Writing Articulation and Assessment

In 1867, Mark Twain wrote, "if you wish to inflict a heartless and malignant punishment upon a young person, pledge him to keep a journal for a year" (1966, pp. 33-34). But that was over a hundred years ago, and besides, we all know Twain kept numerous journals and loved to exaggerate. Actually, many of us have been successfully using individual journals or logs in our courses during the past few years to encourage more student participation and enthusiasm in the writing process. As Toby Fulwiler (1982) explains, these individual journals have created a place for experimentation with the written language, a place for exploring new ideas and a place for self-discovery.

Journals used in this manner establish a dialogue between the student and the instructor which is free from evaluation of grammatical rules and conventions (Fulwiler, 1989). By responding positively to the ideas of our students, we build trust and receptiveness to our suggestions in this non-threatening environment, and Fulwiler notes that our evaluation is most frequently based on length, frequency of response and thoughtful expression. As successfully as individual journals have been, however, I believe that

combining the journal process with the concepts of collaboration will produce more focused writing and learning.

Collaboration

Kenneth Bruffee (1984), who recalls the history of collaborative learning from its early beginnings in the 1950s and 1960s and reviews the theories of Lev Vygotsky and Richard Rorty, has suggested that people learn by interacting with their peers through dialogue, because learning is a social rather than an individual process. Writing, for example, is an act of conversational exchange, and "normal discourse" takes place in the exchange of conversation among peers. If learning is a social rather than an individual process, there is more knowledge to be gained by writing collaboratively, and the influence of the peer group will have a strong influence on the educational development of each member. Similarly, Golub and Reid (1989) acknowledge the significance of social interaction in acquiring new learning, and they also recognize the influence of a peer audience in the learning interaction. Reither and Vipond (1989), however, consider the process of writing to be more collaborative than social and envision three realms of collaboration: co-authoring, workshopping and knowledge making.

Most often, studies concerned with collaboration in writing examine the form and process of one product produced by a group or explore the benefits of peer review and feedback. For example, in a survey of several professional organizations, Ede and Lunsford (1990) endeavored to ascertain the extent to which collaborative writing occurred in the workplace. It was discovered not only that a significant amount of professional writing is collaborative in nature, but also that the process which was intended to produce one co-authored product involved complex interpersonal issues of gender and power. Allen, Atkinson, Morgan, Moore, and Snow (1987) also focused on "shared-document" collaboration and noted the importance of group interaction and shared responsibility. Another study concerned with the collaborative process, which included both the single product as well as the peer review process, was conducted by McLaughlin and Fennick (1987), and their findings indicated a positive attitude by students toward the entire process. They endorsed the use of collaboration from the prewriting stage to the revision stage. Others who have found collaboration to be beneficial are Gere (1987), who focused on the significance of peer response groups; Brufee (1984), who envisioned successful collaboration in peer tutoring; and Elbow (1981), who affirmed the successful

effects of peer editing. Bishop (1988) has examined the successes and failures of peer writing groups, and Goldstein and Malone (1985) have reported favorable results from students who evaluated the group process.

Perhaps to best understand the influence of collaboration in writing we should look closer at the ideas of Ede and Lunsford (1990) and Trimbur (1985). Ede and Lunsford discovered several characteristics in successful collaborative writing assignments, such as allowing sufficient time for group cohesion and the emergence of group leadership. They also proposed a self-evaluation of the process. More problematic, however, are the unanswered questions about the best way to form collaborative groups (e.g. background, interest or competencies), the role of the teacher in developing collaborative writing assignments and the issue of power and authority. One particular mode of collaboration, which they call "dialogic," lends itself to group journal writing because the focal point of the group effort is on the production of knowledge and individual satisfaction in the contribution to that knowledge. This view is similar to Reither and Vipond (1989), and they consider knowledge making essential to the collaborative process. In addition, Trimbur sees collaborative writing as a means of empowering students in their self-acquisition of

knowledge. In a similar vein, Graybeal (1987) has used team journals in a religion course and observed improved course comprehension and improved writing skills. By shifting authority away from the instructor, students actively provide feedback to their peers and create a form of community conversation through their collaborative contributions. Through collaborative situations, such as group journals, we can capitalize upon the benefits achieved from the collaborative process and cultivate thinking and writing skills.

Group Journal Process

For those of us who have enthusiastically endorsed the use of individual journals in our courses, we have found, as has Calkins (1986) and Fulwiler (1982), an improved attitude among our students toward writing. However, by using the strategies of collaboration, I hoped to find a corresponding improvement in the acquisition of knowledge and writing style by initiating group journal assignments along with individual journals in an upper division writing course. Although this Applied Writing course had been designed for prospective teachers, the majority of the students had completed only the two customary freshman composition courses. Also, more than half of the students in each class acknowledged that writing had been an insignificant

performance factor in their preceding course work. Considering our commitment to writing across the curriculum, this information was sadly disappointing. Nonetheless, by moving private journal writing into the more public arena of group journal writing, I anticipated an improvement in their attention to detail, a more mature writing style, and a better understanding of the course material. Since I did not want to discard the benefits of the individual journal, I instead incorporated an additional journal into the process. This second journal was a group journal which was introduced as an assignment in the third or fourth week of the semester, after the class had begun to identify itself as a group and after the students had some knowledge of, and confidence in, each other.

The first step in the group journal process was to divide the class into groups of four or five members. Being sensitive to the perceived influence of social status and gender, I organized the groups after having had an opportunity to observe both their public and private writing style. Each group had an accomplished writer, a less skillful writer and diverse membership (either by age, gender or ethnic backgrounds). Each group member's name and the order in which the group journal was to progress was graphically displayed like a clock on the first page of the

group journal. Recognizing the unwanted additional costs that students might incur, I provided these group journals and placed the graphic display on the first page before I introduced the additional structured assignment. The student assigned to the twelve o'clock starting position was identified as the first group member to respond to the assignment, and then the journal was to be passed clockwise to each member to contribute his or her response. Each student was requested to write a response to a question assigned by me, and then return the group journal at the next class meeting for the next student to respond. After all the members of the group had written their responses, the journal was forwarded to me for review and comment.

The first question for the group was a general one: "What have you learned from the assigned readings in the courses at this point in the semester?" or "Based on your readings so far, what do you consider to be the most important concept(s) you have learned?" The timing of response and return insured that every two weeks I would receive the group journals for my review. In order not to overburden the student assigned to the twelve o'clock position, I rotated the journal within each group so that by the end of the term each member of the group had been

required to be the initial member to respond to an assigned question.

Observations

This process was neither precisely a co-authored effort nor a peer review activity. Instead, the process reflected a different kind of integration and interaction as a result of the influence of collaboration. One of the first occurrences to develop among the group was a careful reading by each member of the responses written by the previous contributors. A review of their comments indicate that each writer in the group journal closely read the entire journal before adding her or his response, presumably in order not to repeat the same statements.

In their individual journals, which continued throughout the entire semester, students would frequently initiate an entry with simple statements of agreement with the author, followed by personal reminiscent comments from their past. For example, in a typical response in a private journal, a student wrote the following reaction to a reading assignment:

> What makes me laugh about Calkins in Chapter 8 is she is talking about me. I remember being in second grade (Mrs Conkeys class) and perfection was my goal. Not a

> single letter out of place. No erase marks were aloud and if by chance there was one of the above the whole paper got trashed! Calkins talks of this and when I read it I couldn't help but to laugh. I also remember writing stories on Donny & Marie Osmond, they were my idols! I got a big star on my paper and a word that said "Perfect." I was so excited that from then on I wrote only about Donny & Marie Osmond. Why stop a good thing, Right?

In the group journal, the same student began the following entry:

> I have learned thus far that I never realized that there was a writing process. It was by reading the texts that I discovered that there are steps in writing. I've always concentrated on the finished product and never gave any thought to the process I used to write my paper with.

There would be an occasional personal comment to another member of the group, such as "I agree, writing involves a lot more time and effort than we think sometimes." The author of the above brief aside continued to compose her following statement:

> I have come to the realization that the writing process can vary from person to person. In the past,

> elementary school writing assignments were structured very rigidly. One day would be spent writing and the next day would be spent revising and rewriting. That is basically the way we were all taught to write. We all have different methods for writing. Some of us write in spurts while others deliberate a time before putting their pen to the paper. Neither way is wrong. Both writers have the potential of writing a really good piece.

Although each student attempted to carefully construct a response that added additional information, while perhaps incorporating an idea suggested from a preceding entry, it was clear that the group members were influencing the direction of the entries. Another student wrote, "I agree with my classmates; in elementary school and high school the focus was almost always on the finished product. How each student arrived at the 'paper' or 'report' was not nearly as important as actually getting there." Frequently, the last writer in the group journal synthesized information from all the previous writers or added new information without the reminiscence. For example, the student who found humor in Calkins wrote the following passage a few weeks later in the group journal: "One thing I found to be especially interesting was the connection that each of us made between

reading and writing, whether we have been taught these connections or not."

A second significant behavior I observed in the group journals was the concerted effort to support their ideas through appeal to textual authority. The following example was written in a group journal:

> In much the same way that many psychotherapies have shifted from a therapist-centered approach to a client-centered approach, teaching methodologies seem to have moved from a strictly teacher-centered to a student-centered approach. The non-judgemental journal writing, the patience of the process of writing, the trust and faith in students' ability to help each other are all Rogerian in concept to me. (Carl Rogers, Client-Centered Therapy, 1950's)

Their responses, rather than recalling memorable events from their past experiences, referred to specific theories in their texts. They were more careful to quote or use more paraphrase than they did in their private journals. One student wrote in her individual journal, "This chapter was so interesting--Calkins is so observant!" However, in the group journal she wrote the following paraphrase:

> Calkins gives many ways to accomplish showing students the reading-writing connection. One way to do this is

> to tell students about the authors whose books they are reading. The students realize there is someone who wrote what they are reading. Another activity would be to take a book that is fairly simple, then have the students write following that style.

Another student cited Calkins directly in her group entry: "'Children need encouragement in order to become confident writers.'" While another quoted Calkins: "'It is listening that creates a magnetic force between writer and listener.'" Since frequently they had already begun to conduct research for their final papers in the course, they incorporated information and hypotheses from their readings. Prior to the introduction of group journals, this information had rarely appeared in their private journals.

Another feature revealed in the process was the sense of responsibility demonstrated by the students in their timely passage of the group journals to the next member. In the event the next person to whom the journal was to be transmitted was absent, they passed the journal to the subsequent student without asking for my guidance or permission. Although I had provided the journal and initiated the activity, the students had taken ownership of the process. Occasionally student would even contact each other outside of class in order to maintain the cycle

identified on the first page of the group journal. They were not, however, as conscientious about punctually submitting their individual journals. They were, it seemed by now, far more interested in the group journal than they were in their individual journals because, I believe, they had a wider peer acceptance from classmates who were not judgmental about their statements but for whom they wanted to be recognized as equally contributing members of the group.

Responses in the group journals, even from the first assignment, were more compact and more organized than their entries in their private journals. The following two examples are typical of the considered responses in the group journal: "The writer must ultimately be responsible for his text, and that is both a responsibility and a freedom. But ownership should be the first lesson taught in any writing program"; "Calkins helps us view writing in a different way. She begins with having students writing down their ideas and even drawing a picture to help students be more detailed." The usual group journal entry was a page to a page and a half long, while the individual journals were frequently longer, but unfocused. The comparison reminded me of a statement attributed to an author whose name I have

long since forgotten. But purportedly he wrote, "I do not have time to write a shorter letter."

From my perspective, however, a major improvement occurred in their writing style. Their sentence patterns were more varied and more complete in the group journals. They wrote in complete sentences rather than the disjoined phrases that often appeared in the individual journals. Transitional phrases began to appear in the group journals, and the diction predictably tended to be more formal than that used in the individual journals. Instead of the frequent use of the first person pronoun, the students wrote from the third person point of view, or retreated to the use of "we" in order to avoid overly using "I". Dashes, parentheses, exclamation marks and underlining rarely appeared in the group journals and, in fact, began to disappear from their individual journals. Punctuation, in general, was more correctly used in the group journals. Colloquial expressions were diminished, and the choice of words became multisyllabic rather than monosyllabic. The entries in the group journals were more clear and exact; more denotative than connotative words appeared, and fewer clichés emerged. In general, the writing was more sophisticated and confident than that found in the individual journals.

Another significant impact of collaboration appeared in the tone of the entries. The chatty, conversational tone that could be heard in the individual journals was missing from the group journals. The personal tone in the individual journal became more objective in the group journal, but since this was still a journal, it was less objective than that normally found in a standard research paper. Without any prior instruction or clues, they had chosen a more mature tone in the group journal.

Conclusions

After observing improved writing skills and knowledge acquisition from the first use of group journals, I have since used them in two other classes, and the improvement occurred each time. An important component of the collaborative process was the improved comprehension of the course material. Since students read each other's entries and also reread sections of the texts, they became immersed in the concepts and theories suggested in the texts. Class discussions became more lively, and by the time they submitted their final public papers at the end of the course, they were thoroughly knowledgeable of the course content.

As a final assignment in the individual journals, I asked students to evaluate the group journal writing activities. I specifically requested the evaluation response be placed in the individual journal in order to maintain confidentiality. Without exception, the students enjoyed journal writing and many planned to use it in their classes when they became teachers. The following evaluation comment perhaps best demonstrates the effect of collaborative writing:

> I fingered through my Calkins book and I realized that the chapters where I have comments written in the margins were the chapters you allowed us to react to as a group. I wanted to let you know that I find that method very interesting because I anticipated how the other students will word their evaluation or summary. It keeps my attention and I tend to make more notes in the margins. Just thought I'd point that out.

They particularly liked group journals, and the end result was rewarding for them and for me.

Although the group journals were used in upper division writing courses, predominately with students on a teacher preparation track, the application of the group journal process can easily be employed by other disciplines. The problematic decisions of group formation and the role of the

instructor may best be resolved by further experimentation. But I found it useful to structure the group and the journal assignments and to award a small percentage (5%) of credit for contribution in the group journal. In the past I have also awarded 10% credit for the individual journals. With each semester, I continue to evaluate the benefits of collaboration in group journals. To date, the process has resulted in improved writing skills, improved comprehension of course content, and an improved attitude toward writing--learning outcomes appropriate for all our students.

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